

# FROM PLATO TO PERIODIC TABLES:

*Two Faculty Members Share Their Perspectives on Teaching in the Liberal Arts*

*Stephen Hicks, Ph.D., Professor of Philosophy & Director of The Honors Program in Liberal Arts*

The hard part about writing about education can be getting past all of the clichés. Excellence. Truth. Honor. Tradition. The Future.

Yet those words do capture essential aspirations for education, especially for those of us at the kind of college Rockford is and can be. I want to focus here on excellence.

All of my education was at large state schools in Canada and the United States. My freshman psychology class had about 600 students. I sat toward the back of a huge auditorium, and I never did get a clear sense of what my professor looked like. Other classes were similar. Most of my tests were graded by machines or graduate students. I had no complaints, and I received a good education at a well-regarded university in Canada.

When I came to Rockford College it was a revelation to me what was possible at a small liberal arts college. Things like small classes and one-on-one conversations with professors. Professors who love to teach and take the time it takes to make comments on term papers and grade essay exams, work with students in labs, and offer personalized feedback on creative art and writing projects.

After I adjusted, I then came to think of it like this: Rockford College at its best takes the *liberal* part of liberal arts education seriously. It takes seriously the education free men and women require. This raises a very philosophical question: What is it to educate free human beings?

One component of freedom is social: Not being subject to authoritarian dictates. We live in a democratic republic, and we take our freedoms seriously. Part of education, then, involves teaching people to be self-governing citizens – individuals who can form sound judgments about complicated matters, who have confidence in their judgments and the initiative to act upon them, and who have the independence of spirit that doesn't let others push them around.



Another component of freedom is cognitive. Ignorant individuals cannot live a fully free life. Knowledge is a form of power, and power extends the range of your freedom. A well-educated person has the knowledge and skills to explore freely the exciting things being accomplished in the arts, the humanities, and the natural and social sciences.

An excellent college integrates those two components. It maximizes student contact with expert professors, and it creates a liberal environment of vigorous inquiry and exploration.

That, however, is the easier part of education. What a college does for its students is important, but the hard part is what students do themselves. Excellence in education happens only when students decide to make it happen. Good teachers and encouragement are nothing to a student who does not have an active and passionate mind.

An active mind is an act of free will. It is the choice to open your mind to what the world has to offer and to maintain that attitude of open-minded seeking.

That can be hard to do – to cultivate your natural curiosity until it becomes habitual, to overcome the laziness, the fear of making mistakes, the fear of having to change your opinions, and the other self-defeating habits that lead some people to shut down their minds. Developing the habits of free and active thinking is the hardest part of education, but it is the only habit that makes excellence possible.

Passion is the other key. Excellence does not happen without passion.

Students sometimes think of education as a duty. They think of going to classes and writing papers as chores they have to do because the professor says so. Naturally this way of thinking drains any passion the student has for education.

Or sometimes students think of education in strictly instrumental terms, as a series of hoops to be jumped through so as to get a job that will pay the

bills. This too drains any passion.

The best response to both of these is a point that is easy to forget: No one has to go to college, attend class, write essays and exams. College is about choosing to explore and grow – and lectures and labs, essays and exams are how you explore and grow.

That is also how you find your passion. A year has fifty-two weeks. There is a difference between working for fifty weeks doing something you do not love and then having two weeks of vacation to do what you really want – versus having a career you are passionate about.

For me it turned out to be Philosophy. It took a lot of exploration before I found it: Philosophy was my fifth choice of major after architecture, engineering, theatre, and political science. Each student follows a different path, but the same point holds for everyone: Jump in and explore the various academic worlds for awhile until you find the one that clicks. But really jump in and explore.

#### *Joseph Ward, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Chemistry*

When I started high school I wanted to be an architect, designing environmentally sound buildings and houses I knew I wanted to be civically engaged. My aspirations to be an architect changed after I took my first chemistry class. I liked chemistry so much, that the next year when Chemistry II conflicted with Architectural Drawing, I chose the former and learned how to convert the chemical responsible for the smell of rancid butter into essence of apple or butterscotch via a simple chemical reaction.

My instructor for that chemistry class, Leo Rice, also showed us how to isolate and quantitate different chemicals from the various samples he provided us. I didn't know it at the time, but in those two years of high school chemistry, Mr. Rice provided his students a good start to the first three years of a college chemistry program (inorganic, organic, and analytical chemistry), and made an impression on me that would guide my future.

After graduation I went to Lawrence Technological University in Southfield, Michigan. LTU is a medium sized private engineering and technology school. I was

attracted by the small chemistry department which, in my mind, would afford a much better education being in a class of 15 than in a class of 450 at a big public university.

To me, the professors were amazing people. They seemed to know everything including when to help me find the answer, or simply direct me to the library to "look it up" (which was also Mr. Rice's favorite saying). I couldn't say exactly when, but sometime before my junior year I simply knew that I wanted to be a college professor. I hoped I could make a difference to students like Mr. Rice and the faculty at LTU did for me.

After graduating from LTU, I started graduate studies in Organic Chemistry at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan. My doctoral dissertation was on the total synthesis of a complex natural product. Like most grad students, I was required to teach chemistry classes to fund my time at MSU. I enjoyed teaching more than any other part of my graduate school experience. During my last summer at Michigan State I had the opportunity to teach an accelerated summer organic chemistry course for 10-15 non-majors and I jumped at the chance. Every teaching experience I had reaffirmed my goal of wanting to teach. Also from those experiences I knew I wanted to find an institution that values the ideals of a small learning environment, personal attention and teaching excellence that I had experienced in my own undergraduate education.

When I read the announcement for the position in chemistry at Rockford College I did some quick research on the college. It was a small institution, which for me translated into the small class size and personal attention for students. It was also an institution dedicated to teaching. The mission of the college to educate students "in liberal arts learning"

which is "complemented and extended by professional and practical experiences," really fits my background.

Now that I am at Rockford College, I look at every new class as an opportunity to provide some of the liberal science education and practical experience that our students can apply to the problems and issues that face the civically engaged person in today's scientifically complex society.

